

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Don't Bet Against the Revolution

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Dear Peter,

Recently, a friend who had spent some time with the New People's Army (NPA) lent me his notebooks. They describe a visit to an NPA training camp during the latter years of the Marcos era when the NPA juggernaut seemed invincible. Although it is now fashionable to write off continued NPA growth, some of the observations may still hold. For after one thousand days of the Administration of President Corazon Aquino, rural poverty and landlessness remain endemic, military abuse persists, and corruption in high office is the norm. I have condensed, reordered, and rewritten his notes and can make no claims as to the veracity of the observations or the objectivity of the analysis that follow.

"When we read [Vo Nguyen] Giap's manual on guerrilla warfare, it describes our situation," said Ka (comrade) Jun, NPA commander for a region covering some 13,000 square kilometers with a population of slightly over one million. Ka Jun, boyish looking at age 36 and cocky for good reason, took a drag on his Marlboro, exhaled over the jungle clearing, and continued: "We launched approximately 150 tactical offensives last year. Of these, about one a month involved an oversized platoon or an undersized company, and four involved the mrgu [main regional guerrilla unit]. In one offensive, we attacked the enemy's barracks and captured two 60mm tube mortars and one bazooka....Over one half of all the barrios in our region are now organized."

NPA guerrillas, men and women, from all over the region had gathered at this jungle hideaway to attend a special conference on cadre training. Its purpose was "to raise the

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political level" of NPA veterans and neophytes. For ten days they discussed political theory and "intensifying guerrilla warfare," shared news about old friends back at distant guerrilla fronts, swapped pointers on making timing devices for landmines, played chess during the day and guitars by lamplight, and generally had a good time.

The ride from the provincial capital to the guerrilla zone was relatively uneventful. After a car with tinted windows had pulled off the main highway and bounced about half a mile along a dusty track, the driver rolled down his window and casually asked a peasant passing by if he had heard of any soldiers in the area. The peasant said no, and the foreign visitor was safely inside the zone. The peasant was no one in particular: this was a red area and anyone living here was considered a supporter.

An all day climb along a ridge line with a group of local NPA guerrillas led to the temporary mountaintop site for the training session. They were about seven--three women in their 20s, two men in their teens, and two veterans, Amado and Pepe. After a briefing on taking cover in case of a chance encounter with the enemy, Pepe led while Amado took up the rear. When the group stopped for a rest, Amado and Pepe would smoke homemade cigarettes (a carton of the prized Marlboros was waiting at the camp to be distributed), chat, and point out the various edible plants.

Amado, a widower at age 42, was tall, sharp featured with an aquiline nose, and looked very much the woodsman. He wore a khaki Philippine Army jumpsuit and a cap that said "Jungle Fighter"--its previous owner had belonged to the elite Scout Rangers. Formerly a tenant farmer and carpenter, Amado had regularly hunted wild pigs with his landlord's old rifle. But after thinking about it for three months, Amado joined the revolution in 1975, working first as a courier. As a veteran of 25 encounters he clearly commanded respect. In his first encounter, 12 of the enemy had surprised him and three others, immediately killing two of the guerrillas. But Amado carefully picked off three of the enemy, and wounded in one leg, made his escape with the other survivor. At the camp he and Pepe often did the cooking and washed the dishes.

Pepe, considered the best fighter in his front, had joined the revolution in 1978, rising to become top political officer for his front. Small, wiry, and intense, Pepe had been a fisherman and joined the revolution because he was "aware of the problems of our people" and also because three of his friends were already NPA members. Two were now dead and one was lying low to avoid capture. Pepe hoped that after the socialist revolution he could return home to his fishing village but wasn't sure if the "people's democratic revolution" would come in his lifetime. His wife, whom he hadn't seen in months, would be leading some of the discussions at the camp.

Half-way along the hard scabble trail, the group paused at a sityo (a small barrio) of 27 families set against a bamboo

grove by a gurgling stream. The families here had long-term permits to farm government "forest land" but no permanent title. Each family tilled 5 hectares on the average with no family tilling more than 8 hectares. This was an organized village. A middle-aged man dressed in his Sunday best, a white shirt and dark blue pants, came out to greet the group. He was the sityo's lay leader and conducted religious services since the local parish priest visited but once a year. Chewing on a match, he fixed his eyes on the visitor and said in the voice of a born preacher: "I'm going to talk straight, not like the Chinese....The government says people are equal but in actuality they are not. In this country the powerful are lucky and the poor are in a very bad situation....There is no other way but revolution."

The lay leader said that as a man of the church he was sometimes troubled by violence and that "it's clear that they [the NPA] would also kill. But it's in the name of justice." He expounded on his theology: "The religion of God and justice are one and the same thing...Whatever problems there are in society, the church is affected...Many problems may be solved by man, but there is another aspect and that is the spiritual aspect. And that is solved by God."

At the top of the ridge line, the group stopped by two thatched huts that sheltered four families. Steep, almost uncultivable slopes fell away at both sides for hundreds of feet. The father of one of the families said they had moved, and in some cases had been evicted, five times since 1972 before coming to this desolate spot in 1979. Back in 1972, he had worked as a tenant harvesting four hectares of coconut. The absentee landlord took three-quarters of the crop. Since that time he and his family had supported the NPA. He said that they were now better off here with four families illegally farming 13 hectares of government "forest land." He expected that the NPA would help defend their land: "we don't have anyone to lean on but the soldiers of the countryside." His wife claimed that back in the lowlands, "when the military comes they're like bandits. They get the animals, everything...the radio, chickens, even the cooking pots...The Scout Rangers are worse and the Marines are less evil, but they are all bad." She claimed that one of her nephews, returning from a gold panning area, had been forced to lie down by soldiers who sprayed a ring of bullets around his head and then robbed him of his money and four grams of gold. Each family here paid a monthly tax to the NPA of two pesos [There are about 20 pesos to the dollar.] and one kilo of rice, but said the wife, "it's OK with the NPAs if sometimes we cannot give because they know how difficult life is."

At the camp, Noel, party leader for the region, explained the need "to raise the political level" of the 20-odd conference participants, most of whom held front or lower district level positions. They, in turn, would work to sharpen the political analysis of the cadres back at their home fronts. With the rapid expansion of the NPA, said Noel, the proportion of party members in the NPA had fallen too low. About half of the NPA fighters and organizers belonged to the party, but of these

only one third were full members. The others were candidate members. While "cadre" usually referred to party members, technically it meant anyone who could lead four NPA personnel. In this region, seven to twelve barrios (villages) formed a section. Three to five sections made up a district. And three to five districts formed a guerrilla front. This region had four fronts.

According to Noel, this was one of the most advanced regions in the area. Cadres had expanded the number of organized barrios from 231 to over 600 in just two years. The region's four guerrilla fronts fielded a total of about 500 firearms. This meant that the enemy theoretically enjoyed a 10 to 1 advantage in manpower. However, Noel noted that many of the enemy were Philippine Constabulary or para-military Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF) personnel and estimated their combat effectiveness at only one half of their number.

The key to this phenomenal growth was the dynamic cycle of political work, finances, and military operations. Advances in one area drove forward progress in the other two areas. This engine of growth was captured in the slogan, "The [people's] army is the leading propagandist in our struggle." Or, as another cadre simply put it, "the army becomes popular when we launch tactical offensives."

Two theoretical breakthroughs helped advance political work. Prior to 1981, cadres here had lumped all classes of peasants together and attempted to organize rich and poor peasants alike. Political work crept forward. But after leading cadres had visited other regions throughout the Philippines, rural society was analyzed in terms of five classes of peasantry. Cadres now focused on first organizing poor peasants and later on middle peasants. In addition, for the first time, cadres organized in the barrios along sectoral lines to answer the particular needs of the main sectors of society--women, youth, fishermen, tribal minorities, etc.

Starting from scratch, said Noel, cadres should be able to "consolidate" a "good barrio" in three months. First cadres set up a temporary barrio liaison group to carry out initial "prop work" [propaganda]. Organizing groups were established, one in each sityo, which may contain 30 to 50 families, and one for each social sector. An organizing group started with perhaps 3 to 10 families. After three months, most adults should belong to an organizing group and a chapter committee was launched. Only then, was the barrio ready for economic and military activities. In this area of the Philippines, cadres helped establish "labor exchanges." This was a development of a traditional practice in which peasants gathered together to work in each other's fields. As Noel explained, peasants "are basically individualistic," and the labor exchange developed critical organizing skills and "collective consciousness" among the peasants. Finally, only after a militia was firmly in place for self-defense, would various party organs be established.

All this was done on a cadre's basic allowance of 20 pesos a month.

But running a no-frills revolution wasn't cheap. A finance officer explained that it cost from 25,000 pesos to 37,000 pesos a month to support one company of about 75 full-time guerrillas. The lower level was rock bottom at which the fighters must eat only low-calorie root crops for ten days out of the month. Ammunition was critical. It chewed up 20% of the cash budget and limited the number of offensives that could be launched. The cost for one round started off at about 1.25 to 1.50 pesos and reached the guerrilla front costing 3 pesos after transport and other expenses were added. [Apparently, ammunition was bought from corrupt military personnel.] In a big operation, such as the attack on the barracks that yielded two 60mm mortars and a bazooka, 147 NPA fighters fired only about 3,000 rounds.

Taxes on landlords, multi-national corporations, and big comprador bourgeoisie provided about half of the region's total annual income of approximately 14 to 17 million pesos. The rest came from the masses. Each of the five classes of peasants theoretically paid a set rate: 5% of net income from their harvest for rich peasants; 3% for upper middle peasants; 2½% for middle middle peasants; 2% for low middle peasants; and nothing for poor peasants. Cadres said that even poor peasants gave (often services), but that no poor or middle peasant paid more than 5% of their income. [Middle and poor peasants would appear to have been far better off economically under the NPA since in NPA areas landlords were prevailed upon to reduce their rents from two thirds of the crop to one third.] Needless to say, organizing more barrios directly increased the revolution's financial base.

Another theoretical breakthrough opened up the way for greatly expanding military offensives. Sometime around 1981, NPA fighters throughout the Philippines had been "freed up" from conducting organizing work to allow them to devote full-time to military matters. But cadres here had added their own innovative twist that may have been equally important. In other areas of the Philippines, organizers carried both pistols and rifles. Here, organizers took the risk of carrying only short arms or no weapons. Rifles were reserved for fighters. The cadres further gambled by paring down the number of rifles in each front to only 10 to 20 in order to concentrate rifles to create main regional guerrilla units (mrgus) of 80 to 120 fighters. It paid handsome dividends. Bigger units meant larger Tactical Offensives (TOs) and greater success. Last year, cadres harvested over 200 high-powered rifles, boosting the region's armory to over 500 rifles. The main target for arms were the ill-trained para-military CHDF. These advances, said cadres, helped propel political work.

Yet, cadres noted that the enemy could still go anywhere. In the past, the enemy needed to deploy two battalions to drive NPA guerrillas out of a front. The NPA fighters would return in six months. Now, it required four to five enemy battalions. Cadres said that when the enemy had previously driven out guerrilla units, some of the demoralized masses joined the CHDF.

Despite the frequency of tactical offensives (almost one small TO every other day), cadres displayed patience and selectivity. Noel said they only launched TOs when they were certain of success.

Hearing that, a nearby cluster of young women, shaking their braids and laughing, chanted in unison: "When the enemy comes, we withdraw. When the enemy rests, we harass. When the enemy withdraws, we pursue..." They trailed off into more laughter. After regaining their composure, the leader of the group, Yolly, announced: "Even though we are women, we are fighters. That's why the newspapers call us Amazons." She and her comrades were dressed in bright colors, preferably red, and seemed to like their title of Amazons.

Yolly and her comrades explained how new NPA members learned by doing. They first engaged in TOs as couriers, bringing supplies or darting out to grab a gun from one of the fallen enemy. Another cadre added, "the best way of training is launching TOs." They have learned well through experience. Yolly, a veteran of seven encounters, and others described two memorable large TOs.

When the elite Scout Rangers were first sent to the region, NPA guerrillas led them around for three weeks of patrols to tire them out. Then about 100 NPA fighters attacked a platoon of some 40 Scout Rangers. In between bursts of gunfire, women NPA fighters called over to the Scout Rangers to surrender. Yolly said with a laugh that rather than lose face by surrendering to women, the Scout Rangers fought on and were nearly wiped out. Twenty-three Scout Rangers were killed before a reserve force of 200 troops arrived. The guerrillas captured seven firearms and lost three killed. Cadres said that their claims on enemy dead were accurate since they intercepted government radio traffic.

Most recently, NPA guerrillas attacked an enemy barracks by luring troops into town to attend a birthday bash, and then waiting for other soldiers to go out on patrol. After the number of troops guarding the barracks dwindled to less than thirty, a force of 147 NPA guerrillas attacked with the aim of capturing some heavier arms. They succeeded, netting two 60mm mortars and a bazooka. But tragedy also struck. A high-ranking cadre from Manila, who had begged to see his first large battle, was hit in the thigh by a stray bullet and bled to death. Noel said the loss hurt: the cadre was an old friend of his and was to have led the conference.

The NPA didn't always come out on top. NPA fighters said their biggest loss last year came when four guerrillas were killed. They claimed that NPA units were rarely caught off guard by the enemy in a major raid or ambush. Estimates varied, but several guerrillas said that for the entire region it happened only six to twelve times last year.

Over the next two days, the cadres rushed final preparations for the conference. Noel said that the death of the cadre from Manila put them behind schedule. The cadre's death was

lamented but did not cloud the festive air surrounding the conference. Sudden death seemed to be an accepted fact of life given the relatively high rate of attrition.

Noel attributed the party's ability to carry on despite losses of key people to two governing principles: collective leadership and systematic education. Collective leadership meant that one member of a cadre's collective could fill in for another. Education moved cadres up the ladder of consciousness and leadership.

The educational system seemed rather complicated but generally followed this plan. The first course was usually the General Mass Course, covering Philippine history, the three basic problems of Philippine society (Feudalismo, Imperialismo, and Bureaucrat-Capitalismo), and the People's Democratic Government. Later, in the Basic Mass Course, pupils were divided into two categories, activists and mass members. Next came the Special Mass Course, each section tailored to a specific sector: women, fishermen, tribal minorities, etc. The Basic Party Course was an intense, six-day immersion in dialectical materialism, political theory, imperialism, and party structure and history. Originally it had 13 topics, but this was too heavy for peasants and workers. The Basic Cadre Course emphasized application and included armed struggle and political struggle. It was taken by all cadres serving at the section level and up.

While cadres who had taken these courses found them difficult, they said they could understand the material based on their own experience. A peasant could become a party member in six months. Generally, an NPA platoon leader would be a party member and a squad leader a candidate party member. Jun, the NPA commander, said ironically that it was harder to educate college graduates and reorient them away from their previous ideology and bourgeois attitudes towards others. "We take it out of them little by little," he said. A lawyer or priest had to wait two to three years before becoming a party member.

During lunch break one day, Yolly and other blushing Amazons explicated that all important matter--PRS, or Proletarian Relations of the Sexes. [The term is a pun on another well-known set of initials: PSR. Philippine Society and Revolution, the bible of the Philippine left, is a dense, jargon-ridden, yet cogently argued class analysis of Philippine society by Jose Maria Sison.]

In theory, courtship, marriage, and divorce were all determined by the cadre's collective. But human nature being what it is, there were generous exceptions. A party member could court only one person at a time. If a cadre was interested in courting someone outside the party, he or she had to first get their collective's permission. While pre-marital sex was a no-no, Nene admitted that "sometimes we forget discipline." Previously, a couple had to wait one year between engagement and marriage. But this was seen as too harsh, and

because many cadres "couldn't wait" the period was shortened to six months. The collective had to OK a marriage, but some couples who were in a hurry would leave the party to marry and then come back.

While marriage was easy, divorce was difficult. It was only granted when the marriage led to "counter-revolutionary tendencies." Unhappy couples generally didn't seek divorce since it took so long. Yolly, the first divorcée in the region, said that she and her husband were required to wait two years to get their divorce by mutual consent. Her ex-husband, who had initiated the proceedings, still had to wait two more years before he could court someone else. Yolly didn't have to wait. She said that it wasn't hard to get engaged again "because the party can take care of matchmaking." [Under Philippine law, divorce is illegal. But notices for "Guam divorce lawyer" pepper the want ads section of Manila's newspapers.]

Often couples were separated for long periods and visits to relatives outside the guerrilla areas were rare. But Nene said that friendships with comrades made up for it. She added wistfully, "sometimes we dream of the movies. We miss the movies, but we have the radio."

Punishments for violating nuptial regulations ran from mild to severe. For cadres who couldn't wait before marriage, "light discipline" consisted of criticism by their collective and re-education. A cadre who had an extra-marital affair was demoted one notch from front secretary to district secretary. This was considered severe punishment and a major scandal.

For those outside the movement, punishments were similarly calibrated. If anything, said Jun the NPA commander, as the movement has grown stronger it has become "more lenient" since it was easier to win over people. Jun noted that back in 1975, the party killed civilian informers, or demonyos (lit. demons), at once. But this tended to alienate their relatives. Now, if a barrio had, say, ten informers, only one would be liquidated as an example. "We avoid killing people," said Jun. "When we kill the top one [informer], the others come over." For other crimes, there were warnings. A man who committed rape was warned once. If he persisted, he would be liquidated. A thief was warned three times, then exiled. A carabao rustler was liquidated at once. District level cadres decided these matters in consultation with the masses. People's courts were not held in this area because the masses were not completely objective.

The conference opened under the shelter of a bright, blue and white striped plastic tarp. As the cadres seated themselves on newly made split-bamboo benches around a long table, Nene continued to pound out the program and welcoming address on an old typewriter. The twenty-odd participants then sang the Internationale in the local dialect. The secretary for the front hosting the conference read the welcoming address.

One by one the participants introduced themselves "in a revolutionary way," stating age, educational level, marital status, their tasks and responsibilities, and their expectations for the meeting. Guidelines for the introductions and each step of the program were chalked out in detail on a blackboard. There was good reason for the slow, and at times plodding, pace. The range in experience among the cadres meant that some needed the reassurance of following guidelines. A teenage participant named Caesar had been with the movement for only four months. Over the last three months, his comrades had taught him how to read and write. A 17-year-old girl, still wearing the white blouse and blue skirt of her school, blurted out her introduction and then hid her embarrassment by playing with the camp's puppy. Nene carefully tallied up the results: all were married, one was divorced, two-thirds had completed high school, one-third had completed elementary school, and one had no formal education. Noel, party chief, had introduced himself as married, 32 years old, a high school graduate, and "full-time" since 1976.

After opening the meeting to questions, (Caesar asked the most interesting one, was there armed struggle in the U.S., and if so, was it linked to the anti-nuclear movement as it was here in the Philippines?), Noel spoke about his expectations for the meeting. Last year, he said, there had been some internal tensions and administrative problems within the region. These had been resolved and it was time to move on. The proportion of cadres at the district level in three of the four fronts had declined because of expansion and needed to be brought up to par.

It was now dusk, and a member of the local unit providing security described escape routes over the flicker of oil lamps. Pepe asked if the "blocking forces" guarding the entrances to the camp were in daily contact with the local intelligence network. The answer was no. Then Yolly spoke. The giggles were gone and she spoke with the authority of lead organizer for her front. She criticized the host cadres for not fulfilling their responsibilities. "It's important to establish a line with the masses not only for our security, but also for the security of the blocking forces." She pointed out that long meetings were exposed to enemy raids, citing a raid last year and one the year before. The head of the local security unit said that they would work on it. Everyone went to bed tense.

The next morning Noel recounted the region's gains over the past year and announced that their main task this year was to double the number of "organized masses." Adjacent regions, hard pressed by increased enemy operations, were calling on them "to invite more enemies." Everyone laughed.

Next, a cadre appropriately nicknamed Yuri, sporting a red bandana and dark sunglasses, presented an overview on "how to intensify guerrilla warfare." The main thrust was to adjust central party documents to local experience and conditions.

Yuri slowly read a document on "The Seven Advantages Of Guerrilla Warfare," pausing to explain each point:

- 1.) We can decide where and when guerrilla warfare happens.
- 2.) It is now clear that the armed struggle cannot be stopped. Success in one region spills over to other regions. Success for one region spells success for all.
- 3.) The political implications of points 1 and 2 will hasten political organizing in towns and cities.
- 4.) As the armed struggle advances, it becomes easier to win over the bourgeois reformists and anti-dictatorship middle forces.
- 5.) The U.S.-Marcos dictatorship finds it difficult to proceed with its plans due to the armed struggle.
- 6.) As the economic crisis intensifies, it creates conditions favorable for armed struggle.
- 7.) Points 1 through 6 will help elicit greater international support.

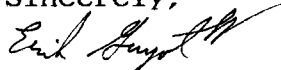
In summing up, Yuri emphasized that the NPA, while still weaker than the enemy, was slowly getting stronger and would eventually win through "attrition and annihilation." He then went over the correct attitudes for intensifying guerrilla warfare, ending with "avoid being pessimistic."

The conference continued for over a week and concluded with a wedding and no enemy contact.

On the way back out, Noel and two others joined in for a quick, nighttime run down the mountains to the lowlands. Noel was going as regional party head, but also in his personal capacity. The mother of the cadre from Manila had come from the capital, hoping to recover her son's remains. She was waiting in a peasant's hut. Noel spoke quietly, apologizing that the body could not be recovered since it had been buried hastily near the military barracks. The woman spoke with resignation of how she had already lost another son to the revolution. Then, because there was a westerner present, she spoke of America. During World War II, her husband had fought with the Americans against the Japanese.

Granted, the preceding description is dated. But one only has to read last month's headlines to see that it still holds some relevance. On December 26, NPA guerrillas in Quezon province, located 120 kilometers southeast of Manila, released six soldiers whom they had held captive since September. For 92 days, the rebels led a massive military task force on a merry chase, held numerous press conferences, and then released the captives back at the village where they had been captured. A U.S. military official once said, "We keep asking ourselves, 'Why hasn't the NPA won?'" He answered his own question, "The Vietcong would have run all over them [the Philippine military] and blown them sky high by now." The NPA may not be the Vietcong, but they only have to be marginally better than the Philippine government to win.

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot

Received in Hanover 2/3/89